

THE NEW COVENANT OF
JEREMIAH 31



BARRY HORNER

THE NEW COVENANT OF JEREMIAH 31:31-40

THE Christian Church is commonly identified as the chief inheritor of the new covenant that Jesus Christ inaugurated, according to His own declaration before the eleven disciples, Judas having left the upper room. Thus, "He took the cup after they had eaten [the distributed bread], saying, 'This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood'" (Luke 22:20). That band of Galileans were nevertheless well versed in the Old Testament, the Tanak according to Hebrew understanding, and it is important to consider what they would have understood upon their hearing of that term "new covenant." Undoubtedly their minds would have recollected the only passage in their Tanak where this expression is recorded, namely Jeremiah 31:31-37. But at the same time they would also have recalled the parallel passages of Ezekiel 11:14-21; 36:22-32. And while the disciples would have certainly been mystified concerning Jesus' sacrificial identification with this prophetic portion, nevertheless it would also have immediately engendered optimistic thoughts concerning Israel's ultimate prospects and glorious future.

However, let us return to a *prima facie* consideration of Jeremiah 31:31-37 without any importation of subsequent New Testament revelation. In other words, let us simply interpret the passage according to the accepted literal, grammatical, historical principles of orthodox hermeneutics.

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A. The context of Jeremiah 31:15-26.

The preceding context of Jeremiah 31:15-26 envisages national Israel experiencing "lamentation and bitter weeping" on account of severe chastisement," vs. 15, 18a. Nevertheless the Lord declares that there is "hope for your future," v. 17, on account of sincere repentance, but preeminently because "'My heart yearns for him [Ephraim My dear son]; I will surely have mercy on him,' declares the LORD." As a consequence, a reversal of circumstances will come about whereby the blessing of the LORD will be so outpoured upon His people "in the land of Judah" that everyone will be refreshed in the environment of His righteousness, vs. 23-25. Perhaps the awakening of v. 26 may be likened to an appropriate pause, a "selah," that declares something of monumental importance is immanent.

B. The New Covenant promises sweet restoration in place of sour judgment, vs. 27-30.

"Days are coming" announces that for national Israel there is coming a reversal of circumstances of apocalyptic proportions (23:5-6; 31:31, 38) in which "I will fulfill the good word which I have spoken concerning the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

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In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch of David to spring forth; and He shall execute justice and righteousness on the earth. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell safely, and this is the name by which she will be called: the LORD is our righteousness" (33:14-16).

1. God will invest both Israel and Judah with fruitfulness, v. 27.

In the place of desolation, God will initiate spiritual and material prosperity. "For, behold, I am for you, and I will turn to you, and you will be cultivated and sown" (Ezek. 36:9). "I will sow her for Myself in the Land. I will also have compassion on her who had not obtained compassion, and I will say to those who were not My people, 'You are My people!' And they will say, 'You are my God' (Hos. 2:23).

2. God will reconstruct both Israel and Judah, v. 28.

To the degree that God has judicially punished His people with sword and famine and exile, "I will set My eyes on them for good, and I will bring them again to this land; and I will build them up and not overthrow them, and I will plant them and not pluck them up" (25:6).

3. God will refresh both Israel and Judah with national security, vs. 29-30.

The proverb, "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge," was used to describe national, and not simply individual, participation in the punishment that God inflicted upon His people (Lam. 5:7). But this circumstance will change when there is national restoration and blessing for Israel, v. 29. Of course, such a glorious prospect will not eliminate individual responsibility, v. 30.

- C. The New Covenant promises law on the heart in place of tables of stone, vs. 31-34.

The introduction of the thought of an eschatological "new covenant," **בְּרִית** **חֲדָשָׁה**, berit khadashah, LXX διαθήκην καινήν, diathēkēn kainēn, must have appeared as revolutionary to the Hebrew reader, particularly when it is qualified as supplanting the revered Mosaic covenant.

1. The New covenant incorporates Israel and Judah, v. 31.

This new agreement introduces what is often thought to be perhaps Jeremiah's most significant contribution. It is intriguing in that its lack of stipulations invites speculation that does not find satisfactory fulfillment until the advent of Messiah the Branch, who Jeremiah does anticipate (23:5; 33:15; cf. Isa. 4:2; Zech. 3:8; 6:12).

Although the unilateral nature of this covenant is implicit at this stage, it becomes more explicit in v. 33. Both the nations of Israel and Judah, their unification also being implicit, are the specific objects of the LORD'S saving design, not the Christian church. Yet the Gentiles, wild olive branches, will be engrafted into "the rich root of the olive tree" (Rom. 11:17).¹

2. The New Covenant transcends the Old Covenant, v. 32.

The main thrust of Hebrews would seem to have its genesis here, namely the better character of the second covenant over the first covenant (Heb. 7:19, 22; 8:6; 9:23; 10:9; 12:24). So the new covenant will essentially be unlike the old covenant that was cut with the fathers (Exod. 24:3-18), the leaders of Israel (Exod. 24:1-2). There the basic stipulations were externally engraved by the finger of God on tablets of stone. The redemption of God whereby He brought His people out of Egyptian bondage was based upon the fact that He "heard their groaning; and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Exod. 2:24; 3:13-17). Following the exodus, and due to sin such as murmuring, prior to arrival at Mt. Sinai the Law "was added because of transgressions" (Gal. 3:19; cf. Jer. 11:8; Rom. 5:20). However the external commandments were impotent (Heb. 7:18) insofar as effecting heartfelt conformity to the righteousness of God was concerned. Further, the external regard of God for Israel as a husband for His wife did not produce faithfulness (Isa. 54:5; Ezek. 16:8; Hos. 1:2; 3:1-3).

3. The New Covenant engraves the law on the heart, v. 33.

However "after those days" of old covenant incompetence, God will cut a new covenant with "the house of Israel," using His same finger, yet engraving the transcript of His righteousness upon "their heart." Thus "My law" will be internalized within the souls of the Hebrew nation. This will not simply be a biblical data download from heaven that invades the intellect, but the transplant of a "heart of flesh" for a "heart of stone" (Ezek. 36:26) that results in a godly transformation of the intellect, will, and emotions (II Cor. 3:3). Here the unilateral element is most obvious. This is the identical emphasis concerning the radical dynamic of the new covenant in Hebrews 9:9-14 whereby the conscience is able to

¹ The indication of common misunderstanding here on the part of Christians is illustrated by a sermon of Charles Simeon on Jeremiah 31:31-34 titled "The New Covenant." In the whole message there is not one reference to Israel or Judah while the new covenant is twice called the Christian covenant. The subsequent sermon on Jeremiah 31:35-37 is titled "The Church's Security." However, Simeon's pro-Semitism is clearly indicated in the following sermon titled "The Future Conversion Of The Jews," based on Jeremiah 32:37-42, in which he clearly expresses his belief in the restoration of Israel to the land. There is the specific qualification that "this diffusion of piety will not precede, but follow, their [Israel's] restoration to their own land." Then they will be "an holy people unto the Lord." *Horæ Homileticæ*, IX, pp. 236-255.

be cleansed. Thus the new covenant is not a warmed over version of the old covenant but a radically distinct covenant that better communicates the same essential righteousness that the old covenant demanded but could in no way produce. Thus the new covenant communicates the New Torah of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In terms of its addressees, the new covenant is plainly established with the nation of Israel through its Messiah who was “cut,” that is “pierced through for our transgressions, . . . crushed for our iniquities” (Isa. 53:5). Yet through this new covenant will “all the families of the earth be blessed” (Gen. 12:3) as “wild olive branches” engrafted into “the rich root of the olive tree” (Rom. 11:17). Then shall the Gentiles enter into new covenant blessings.

4. The New Covenant implants the knowledge of God in the heart, v. 34.

Here the radical nature of the preceding divine surgery is explained in terms of its cause and effects. There is a logical order here that is of vital importance. It concerns the truth that sin voids the true knowledge of God by man; sin brings disjunction so that communication is impossible (Isa. 59:2); sin causes heavy static whereby the transmission process between God and man results in a garbled, distorted message.

a. The radical forgiveness of sin according to the grace of God, v. 34b.

Here is the ground upon which a restored knowledge of God by man is made possible. Clearly atonement is necessary though here its form is not specified. The point is that this work of propitiation will cool the anger of God toward His sinful people. Thus He will be righteously disposed to pour out His Spirit upon the nation of Israel, which baptism Ezekiel describes: “I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes” (36:27), “I will put My Spirit within you and you will come to life” (37:14).

b. The radical impartation of the knowledge of God, v. 34a.

The intensity, even fanatical devotion of Israel’s quest for the knowledge of God is legendary, particularly with regard to its study of the Tanak and Talmud. But at the same time this zeal for the Law proved to be deadening to the soul, as Paul himself indicates (Acts 22:3; Gal. 1:14), even blinding (II Cor. 3:14). Hence it is this condition that will change upon the conversion of national Israel. Rather, as Keil clarifies:

The knowledge of Jahveh, of which the prophet speaks, is not the theoretic knowledge which is imparted and acquired by means of religious instruction; it is rather knowledge of divine grace based upon the inward experience of the heart, which knowledge the Holy Spirit works in the heart by assuring the

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sinner that he has indeed been adopted as a son of God through the forgiveness of his sins.²

Further there will be no elitism, no intellectual class consciousness, since “they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them.” Hence the attitude of the Jew toward the Gentile will be one of humble fellowship.

D. The New Covenant promises certainty guaranteed in creation, vs. 35-37.

Centuries are to pass before such a wondrous promised hope will be fulfilled. Hence, assurance must be upheld when the nation of Israel “passes through the waters” and “walks through the fire” of tribulation (Isa. 43:1-2). Consequently the following graphic scenario is one of Scripture’s most compelling portrayals of God’s covenant faithfulness. With this in mind, it is wholly inappropriate for the proponents of replacement theology to subtly change the details of the preceding new covenant, particularly concerning its explicitly named addressees, “the house of Israel and the house of Judah,” while maintaining that exegetical faithfulness to the text is upheld.

1. The visible creative tokens of God’s covenant faithfulness, v. 35.

Here the vision is of the mighty creative hand of God, but especially those items which are connected with the fixed sequence of day and night and tides. These are related to the regular appearance of the sun, moon, and stars, as well as the rise and fall of the oceans. Every day and every night man can observe the fixity, the dependability of these sequential matters.

2. The inviolate guarantee of God’s covenant in the fixed order of creation, v. 36.

If the preceding unvarying order should give way to chaos, then and only then is it conceivable that the children of Israel should cease to exist through the invalidation of the new covenant. However every day provides the opportunity for contemplation of God’s faithfulness concerning His keeping of His covenant with Noah (Gen. 8:22); thus His dependability with regard to the new covenant should be undoubted.

3. The inviolate guarantee of God’s covenant in the immensity of creation, v. 37.

From the realm of orderly sequence we move to that of dimensional limits. Only if the finite can plumb the depths of the infinite, if man can discover the boundaries of heaven and the cornerstone of the earth, if a speck of humanity can

² C. F. Keil, *The Prophecies of Jeremiah*, II, p. 40.

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estimate the immensity of God, only then is it possible for Him to forever disannul the new covenant and thus disinherit His children.

E. The New Covenant promises the restoration of Jerusalem, vs. 38-40.

The significance of the restoration of the land to new glory (Ezek. 11:17-18; 36:28-36), as an inevitable consequence of the new covenant, is indicated by the focus upon the glory that the new Jerusalem will experience.

1. The restoration will be for the LORD, vs. 38-39.

This construction will have dimensions greater than any previous building of Jerusalem that will overshadow former places of death, paganism, and shame. But the preeminent character of the city will be its God-centered focus in view of the enthronement of Messiah as “king over all the earth” (Zech. 14:9).

2. The restoration will be holy to the LORD, v. 40.

The soil previously seeded with unholy “dead bodies and ashes” shall give way to a holy topography that shall be seeded with the living, blessed, Messiah worshipping children of God. Thus Keil rightly concludes:

From this description of Jerusalem which is to be built anew, so that the whole city, including the unclean places now outside of it, shall be holy, or a sanctuary of the Lord, it is very evident that this prophecy does not refer to the rebuilding of Jerusalem after the exile, but, under the figure of Jerusalem, as the center of the kingdom of God under the Old Testament, announces the erection of a more spiritual kingdom of God in the Messianic age (Zech. 14:10-11).³



³ Ibid., pp. 46-47.